

"Talking Point..."

Moving Online

Ann Hedges, Return to Professional Practice Course Leader

Liz Phasey, Mentorship in Professional Practice Course Leader

Facilitated by David Mathew, Centre for Learning Excellence

Introduction (DM)

I had been working with Ann and Liz, on and off, for a few months before the idea of capturing their thoughts for a short piece for the *Journal* struck me. I asked them to reflect on the process so far of developing their courses – Return to Professional Practice and Mentorship in Professional Practice respectively, both in the area of healthcare – for a new audience of learners who would study part of the programme as an online package from a distance. It might be worth noting from the outset that although both Ann and Liz were aware that I had approached the other, they did not confer on their responses... and the coincidences are noticeable. Ann writes first.

Thoughts about online learning (AH)

In some ways I feel that my introduction to online learning was 'unexpected'. I had had an idea about adapting a course I ran to distance learning, having studied my first degree with the Open University in the '80s, and had imagined that 'my course' would be supported by handbooks, worksheets etc. I had not thought about a computerised package. I have also developed a 'paper pack', for my own students use, along the old OU model, and that was how I thought it would be.

For this reason alone, the first meeting I had with members of the Centre for Learning Excellence was an eye opener! I thought we would be talking paper – not electronic, and

inside me, I was in panic mode. I had no idea how this was going to work out, and initially could not see how I could develop the material. I also panicked about the level of IT skills needed, as I certainly lack skills in this area. However, by the end of the first meeting, although still slightly apprehensive, I was a little clearer of what I was about to embark on.

David Mathew arranged ongoing meetings, to check up on progress, which for me was an excellent strategy, as it meant that the work never got 'put on the back burner' as there was, for me, a healthy amount of pressure being maintained.

I finally sent David my first document with my 'session' and I was very excited when he sent the link for my first session (*the link to the online version – DM*). I am very pleased with how it turned out, and am going to 'trial' with some other students for their feedback. (*This trial has now taken place, and the feedback was extremely positive – DM.*)

I must admit I became quite excited about the possible opportunities, and by the end of my second meeting with David my ideas were spiralling – so much so that when I had to put together a tender for a training package, online learning was a key part for this (unfortunately we did not get it).

I can see that online learning has a great potential value for learning, and for looking at

different ways of disseminating material. I believe that variety is important, and I also know if I have to 'do' something, rather than just read documents, I am more likely to maintain the motivation.

I also have some questions which perhaps would need addressing in the future. At the moment it appears to me (and I may be completely wrong on this) that as this is a fairly new development, it is being encouraged. I am sure there will be a cutoff point when this type of opportunity will only be available if it meets certain criteria. For example, I could see the opportunity for online learning as additional resources to support other learning. My background is learning disability, and I am passionate about promoting the care of these service users in acute hospitals. I do a session for students on this. However, the amount of information I can cover is limited. I could see the value of doing an additional information pack which would be available for them should they wish to take information regarding learning disability further. However, would the amount of time taken to develop these packs justify it, when only a few students would probably actually use it?

On the positive side, the pack that has been developed does not take a great deal of IT knowledge either by me (which is a good thing) or by my students, which, because of the nature of the student group I am currently working with, is essential, as some may only have very basic computer skills.

Looking back now to my initial idea of 'distance learning' and where I am now, I am so pleased as to the way this has been developed, and am excited about future ideas. I am also very grateful for the amount of help and support given by David, who has been instrumental in moving a very loose idea

into something concrete, and this has helped me develop confidence in this area.

E-learning and me! (LP)

In a rather roundabout way I was asked to lead the MSPP unit. This was a new role for me as I'm employed as a practice educator and previously had concentrated on practice. I had to learn a completely new language and engage in University bureaucracy for the first time, e.g. administration, exam boards etc. I also had to mark academically for the first time, which represented a steep learning curve. All of this had made me rather anxious in the first instance. As an aside I was then informed by my head of department that 'by the way, two days now need to be replaced with e-learning'! (*Liz is referring to two days out of a compulsory allocation of five – DM.*) All of this made me fearful of the end result for which I was now responsible.

I have written about my lack of IT knowledge and skills previously so won't repeat that. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that I would be provided with lots of support, and would actually build the resource for me. All I had to do was supply the materials and offer some clarity.

David Mathew offered to sit in on the first day of the MSPP course and this seemed to be helpful for him to encounter the type of student I was working with. David fed back that he was surprised by the youthfulness of these students.

At our next meeting David had compiled an electronic package from the materials I had provided, which I was delighted with. Looking at this material I realised that much of the teaching on the MSPP course had been 'talk and chalk' teaching which can be quite boring. Students can easily engage with this new approach from home in a much more engaging way through interactive e-learning.

If anything, it has made me more aware of how the delivery of face to face 'teaching' for this course must become more of a social learning experience, and I have already spoken to the teaching team about how we can make our delivery more engaging.

For the future I think we may even ask for 3 days of e-learning, with a reduction to two contact days; but we will have to see how the course develops.

I have been asked to write a course that is non-accredited i.e. that attracts no academic credits. My first thoughts were... hooray! No marking! This has been requested by the Strategic Health Authority as it will be a cheaper course to buy and will mean staff are out of practice for less time. This request has made me think about the aspect of academic writing *per se*. Why do we think that a mentor who writes a 'good' academic assignment will become an effective mentor? The academic route has been one we've always used to demonstrate that learning has taken place, but I'm not sure this is always the case. Maybe engaging with and enjoying the online

learning experience would be a reasonable way to measure that learning has been achieved.

I am concerned that all the support for the e-learning so far will diminish once set up. I would hate this course to become like the BREO site which can be a bit of a dumping ground and graveyard for old material. There have been many instances of students being unable to log on to the BREO site and as the e-learning package will be sited here I am concerned this may become an issue.

I would like to ensure that all teaching materials, BREO and e-learning would be fully integrated i.e. that students have to engage with e-learning before attending contact days to enable the teaching team to move the students' learning on.

I am excited and concerned in almost equal measure about the future of this course. I do fully appreciate the support offered by the CLE team so far, and feel that I may be able to ask for more help e.g. rearranging the BREO site and making this more user friendly.

Book Reviews

The SAGE Handbook for Research in Education: Pursuing Ideas as the Keystone of Exemplary Inquiry.

Dr Clifton F. Conrad and Dr Ronald C. Serlin (Eds.)

SAGE Publications. Second Edition (2011)

Review by Mark Atlay

This second edition of this well established book in the SAGE Handbook series has some lofty ambitions:

To encourage and inspire educational researchers to pursue meaningful enquiry, this

handbook is intended to stimulate and encourage educational researchers to place the pursuit of ideas at the epicentre of their research – from framing meaningful problems to identifying and addressing key challenges to the reporting and dissemination of their findings.

The Handbook is divided into three parts. The first of these explores the purposes of educational research from professional enquiry to informing and challenging policy-making and how to frame meaningful problems and associated research strategies.